

REMARKS FOR ACTING DEPUTY ADMINISTRATOR STAN MEIBURG
PRESS CALL ON EPA'S INTERNAL REVIEW OF THE GOLD KING MINE INCIDENT
August 26, 2015 // Washington, DC // ~ 10 MINS

Hello everyone. Thanks for joining the call today. With me is Mathy Stanislaus, Assistant Administrator for Solid Waste and Emergency Response.

As you know, EPA emergency response staff have been working continuously in response to the Gold King Mine incident that occurred on August 5th.

We remain closely engaged with state and local officials in Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, and tribal representatives from Southern Ute, Ute Mountain, and Navajo Tribal Nations.

Our collective goal is to work with our partners to complete the emergency response and restore use of the river to pre-incident conditions. In addition, we want to get to the bottom of what happened in order to ensure it doesn't happen again.

From the outset, we have been committed to sharing accurate information as quickly as possible, as experts work to analyze any effects the spill may have on drinking water and public health.

Today, consistent with our commitment to transparency, EPA is releasing an *Internal Review of the August 5th Gold King Mine Blowout*. This review includes an assessment of the events and potential factors contributing to the incident.

In response to a charge from Mathy, an Internal Review Team of EPA scientists and engineers conducted a one-week rapid assessment of the Gold King Mine blowout.

To get the facts, the Internal Review Team conducted a site visit, several interviews, and reviewed pertinent documents. Their aim was to quickly assess what occurred and provide conclusions and recommendations so that we can learn from this experience, and so that we may take actions to address safety at similar sites across the country.

To start, the assessment presents a chronology of events that tell the story of the Gold King Mine – a historically unstable site, where various actions have been taken over the years by the Gold King Mine Corporation, the State of Colorado, and the EPA.

The Mine was subject to a number of collapses over the years, and there had been several construction activities undertaken to stabilize and abate the ongoing source of contamination to the Animas River.

Based on the identification by the State of Colorado Division of Reclamation, Mining and Safety of unstable conditions at the Gold King Mine, EPA and the State of Colorado developed a plan in 2014 to address the unstable conditions and reduce flow of contaminants to the Animas River.

This was done in consultation with the Animas Stakeholder Group – a group comprising representatives of agencies, industry, local citizens, and former miners. The resulting plan consisted of actions to restrict flow into the Animas River, address blockages, and relieve water build-up in the Gold King Mine.

Initially, in 2014, a retention pond was constructed to capture solids that might be released during the work, drain pipes were installed, and investigation of the site conditions was performed by EPA.

This year, further investigation and actions were planned, including incremental dewatering and removal of blockages. Plans for these actions were again developed with the State of Colorado Division of Reclamation, Mining, and Safety and in consultation with the Animas Stakeholder Group.

In today's Report, EPA's Internal Review Team lists key findings about the incident that occurred on August 5th. I'll summarize a few of them now – and you can find more details in the full report on our website.

- The Review Team concluded that the EPA group responsible for excavating the mine was experienced and professional. Prior to commencing work, the group collected and analyzed flow data, inspected the site, and became familiar with its topography. EPA and the Colorado Division of Reclamation, Mining, and Safety also held public meetings to present their work plans. To the best of the Review Team's knowledge, no informed parties raised concerns about these plans.
- The Review Team found that, based on expert knowledge and information from

the site, the group responsible for excavating the site determined there was zero or low mine water pressure. This determination was based on several factors, including observing water draining at the site, and reviewing seeps at the adit –an adit is an opening into a mine. The determination was also based on considering past experience at the site, details of the operation, and area hydrology.

But there was, in fact, high enough water pressure to cause a blowout. The Review Team concludes that an underestimation of water pressure inside the mine workings was likely the most significant factor related to the blowout.

- The Review Team also concluded that expensive and technically-difficult site drilling could have potentially detected the high water pressure. However, professionals on the ground from EPA and the State of Colorado did not have evidence to suggest this technique would be necessary. The Review Team identified technical challenges, safety, timing, and cost as factors in considering this technique—and also identified the steepness and instability of slopes at the site as a key safety consideration.
- While the work plan included provisions for mine emergencies, including cave-ins, the Review Team also found that provisions for a worst-case scenario were not incorporated into the excavation work plan. That information could have been useful in the case of a significant blow out – like the one that occurred.
- In addition, the report states that actions by EPA staff to pull out site personnel prior to blowout probably avoided fatalities.

In today's report, EPA's Internal Team lays out several recommendations, including the development of guidance for minimizing the risk of blowouts, and – for sites with blowout potential – the inclusion of protocols in Emergency Action Plans for mitigation after-the-fact.

We are taking these recommendations seriously and EPA's Office of Solid Waste and Emergency Response is prepared to accept and begin implementation right away. Actions include developing guidance on safety precautions for similar circumstances, and developing additional tools to identify the presence of similar risks at other sites.

We have notified state, local, and tribal officials, as well our Inspector General and the Department of Interior about the findings and recommendations being released today.

And we expect this internal assessment will be informative as the Inspector General and the Department of Interior move forward with their independent reviews of the Gold King Mine incident.

EPA remains committed to transparency and will continue to share information with the public and our stakeholders as it becomes available.

Thank you. We'll now open the line for questions.

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